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## SOME ASPECTS OF MATTHEW ARNOLD'S POETRY

A lover of Matthew Arnold's poetry and a persistent student of his poetic methods once told me that Arnold's work possesses three characteristics which make it unique in nineteenth-century poetry. These three, the devotee declared, are fused; they are recurrent; and, although not everywhere apparent, they are his predominant characteristics as a Victorian poet. The three characteristics are: the mastery of mood-creating detail, the sacrifice of narrative to philosophical ideas, and a very special type of Hellenism. The essence of a writer's thought is sometimes discernible in his minor poems. In the poetic novitiate, before the *ars celare artem* has crept in, the poet's natural aims are evident. True, this is apprentice work, but for that very reason ideas and themes are clear, unconfused by elaboration. To understand the complex structure of the oriole's nest, we must watch him at the first of his weaving. To appreciate the perfection of Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* we must examine some of his bad early stanzas. Arnold has written four poems which, although not weak nor especially early in point of composition, proclaim unaffectedly these three characteristics.

For mood-creating detail—moods of beauty strange and rare—there is *The Forsaken Merman*. The precise source of this story is problematical, but something may be learned about Arnold's art from merely a consideration of its possible sources. For example, did Arnold know Fouqué's *Undine*? Since no real biography of Arnold exists, we do not know. At least he was familiar with the ghostly traditions of the North Coast. He wrote of the Merman and the Neckan, and he probably knew something of cognate legends: sirens who bewitch fishing fleets; merbabies who are washed ashore and are buried by northern landmen. During the time he was composing *The Forsaken Merman* Arnold was reading French and German. He may have met—with pleasure—*Die Schöne Agniese*. Or, we should like to believe, he knew and liked George Borrow's ballad from the Danish, so like *The Forsaken Merman*. Actual proof that this particular poem was the source of *The Forsaken Merman*

there is none. The mood, indeed, is severe, while Arnold's is plaintive, and the conclusion is different. Nevertheless, *The Deceived Merman*, crude as it is, is certainly based upon the same legend. These very lines may have been studied by Arnold:—

"The Merman up to the church door came;  
His eyes they shone like a yellow flame;

"His face was white, and his beard was green—  
A fairer demon was never seen.

"Now, Agnes, Agnes, list to me,  
Thy babes are longing so after thee.'

"I cannot come yet, here must I stay  
Until the priest shall have said his say.'

"And when the priest had said his say,  
She thought with her mother at home she'd stay."

Certainly, this is rather like the buried ancestor of Arnold's poem revisiting the upper air, yet no positive assertion can be made. What such prying into ancient forms of the legend does emphasize is the elaboration of Arnold's version. Arnold's use of detail is by no means Tennysonian, but, compared with this rude carving of a story, his is a cameo, delicate and sure.

The detail which Arnold dwells upon most is the wind. He is interested in the effects of the air upon Margaret and upon the Merman. The forsaken husband comes to Margaret only in moments of calm, and when the great winds shoreward blow he longs to flee back to his windless home in the deep sea. The village church is hateful, for it is perched on the *windy* hill, and as he peers into it, in search of Margaret, he shrinks from the cold, blowing airs. Margaret's punishment is the loss of husband and children, but, hardly less, she forfeits—

"The sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep,  
Where the winds are all asleep."

She is to be tortured by the sound of the blowing winds and the gusty shaking of the doors!

Such a detail is not in itself unlovely, and by means of it Arnold achieves beauty, for the poem is touched with the magic of life in the sea-deeps, the life of strange sea-beasts, of unearthly flowers, of the quiver and gleam of spent lights. The

imagination is stirred with the mystery of sea-change, of occult sights and sounds. Red-gold thrones gleam, and through the windless abysses is intoned the tintinnabulation of a far-off, ghostly bell. Definite, yet mystical, boons for the inward eye and ear.

Another use of particular detail is in Arnold's choice of words for his refrain:—

"Children dear, was it *yesterday*?"

The merman is insensible to the passage of time. The mood of a poem is the sum of its details, and such details create in *The Forsaken Merman* the mood that Arnold desires, that of strange, unhuman regret and yearning. The total effect is photographic: we *see* the white-walled town, the church on the windy hill, and the merman watching through the window. Inside sits Margaret, unrelenting, her eyes sealed on the holy book. We actually see this, and it is unforgettable.

The second and third poems, *Mycerinus* and *The Sick King in Bokhara*, reveal Arnold absorbed in a philosophical idea. The two poems are complementary, almost interdependent; they should always be studied together. In each story the central figure is a king, and each king is youthful both in years and in attitude towards life. *The Sick King in Bokhara* is Asian in theme; it is reminiscent of forgotten dynasties; and the verse vibrates with the melodies of Mervé, Orgunje, and Samarcand. But, like *Mycerinus*, it is Greek in tone, and its source is Herodotus.

Mycerinus is stunned by a decree of an oracle cutting him off with only six more years of life. He suffers less from fear of death than from spiritual confusion, for although his father was evil he had long life, while Mycerinus, though good, must die in youth. He meditates bitterly on the overthrow of his notions of justice. For Mycerinus had been orthodox; he had supposed that men's idea of justice was but a reflection of the justice of the gods. But here is compelling evidence that the gods have their own fancies about what is 'just'. Mycerinus feels that his ethics have been askew, and not least in his chagrin is the realization that his virtue, based on his self-conceived idea of

justice, has deprived him of sense pleasures. Cynically, his has been a wasted life, for, as Renan says, if there is not justice, then are the wise men fools and the fools wise men. His ideals have been—

“Vain dreams, which quench our pleasures, then depart,  
When the duped soul, self-master'd, claims its meed;  
When, on the strenuous just man, Heaven bestows,  
Crown of his struggling life, an unjust close.”

In the meantime the gulled Mycerinus, worshipping phantoms of justice, has had—

“ . . . no joy in dances crown'd with flowers,  
Love, free to range, and regal banquetings.”

Mycerinus has been naïf. The bay-trees of the wicked he has not noticed, but, as he meditates now, he sees nothing else, and the thought comes to him that even the gods themselves may be under what he feels so keenly now, the dire and mysterious Law, hateful *Ανάγκη* which, without explanation, compelleth man. Then we hear of Mycerinus in his palm-grove,—

“ . . . holding high feast at morn, rose-crowned,”

consuming the six years in pleasure. Yet Arnold's Epicureans are a cautious lot. Mycerinus finds the feast joyless; he meditates always upon the mystery of the Law, and, as the years pass, learns its meaning; he submits:—

“Took measure of his soul, and knew its strength,  
And by that silent knowledge, day by day,  
Was calm'd, ennobled, comforted, sustain'd.”

Mycerinus in the face of inexplicable destiny does not live in a tub, nor console himself in debauch; he is neither Stoic nor Epicurean; he learns to live out the Law.

In essence the experience of the King in Bokhara is similar. As he rides forth, indifferent, secure, his way is barred by a prostrate man begging judgment and punishment by law. In the drought he has stolen drink from his mother, and he seeks atonement. The King is not unkind, but brushes him aside as a crank. Again he is stopped and importuned with the same plea, and again the slave is turned off as some poor devil beside himself. Yet a third time he supplicates the King. Baffled, but still kind,

the King exacts negligently the penalty of the Law, himself casting the first stone. The man dies, joyful, praising Allah.

This is revelation. The King perceives that this man is not a crank or a poor devil, but a human soul desiring to fulfil the Law. The contrast of this creature's sense of responsibility—to such law as he knew—with his own nonchalance in judgment stirs him deeply. Here is one with a higher vision of Truth than he, as King, possesses, for the slave had learned that happiness under the Law dwells only in fulfilment. Bokhara buries the slave with the honors of a king, and, like Mycerinus, he reflects.

He recalls the platitudes of his Vizier, that the King cannot bear the burden of all other men; that he has, in fact, no direct responsibility towards the slave. If this is the case, there is then written law for the slave, and no law, written or unwritten, for the King. But this is nonsense. The King is driven back upon what he knows now for truth: that for the slave there is the letter of the law, but for the King himself the spirit of the law. The latter, the higher law, is more exacting than the former, and to this he has been disloyal. The Law, although written for one, and unwritten for another, is no less stringent for king than for slave. Authority does not create the Law, but Law the authority:—

“But hear ye this, ye sons of men!  
They that bear rule and are obey'd,  
Unto a rule more strong than theirs  
Are in their turn obedient made.”

This, although elaborated upon, is the same sense of Law that Mycerinus felt. What impresses a lover of narrative as he reads these two poems is the lack of emphasis upon incident and dramatic situations. For such the philosopher-poet cares little. The oracle in *Mycerinus*, the slave's sin in *The Sick King in Bokhara* are merely grist for Arnold's purpose,—the delineation of states of mind. That Arnold cares for mood rather than action is apparent in a number of lyrics, such as *Dover Beach* and *A Summer Night*, which describe merely the *penetralia* of Arnold's own mind. Two stories, of narrative interest, are subordinated to substantially the same philosophical idea.

*The Strayed Reveller*, the fourth poem, illustrates Arnold's Hellenism. Arnold's love of Greek life and thought permeates all his poetry; it is absurd to think of it as centred in any single poem. Nor does any one poem illustrate the differences between Arnold and other nineteenth-century poets who turn to Greece for inspiration. Yet one special characteristic *The Strayed Reveller* has: it indicates Arnold's independence of spirit in writing of a Greek theme in a Greek manner. That is to say, in this poem he wrote of a traditional Greek theme without a suspicion of what he himself called "Hebraism": the alteration of the story to achieve a moral lesson.

For the other English poem obviously like *The Strayed Reveller* in situation is Milton's *Comus*. In both is the tale of the seductions of Circe; in both are the banquet and the magic drugs, even to the hæmony of *Comus* and the moly of *The Strayed Reveller*. But from the first note of the opening alcaics Arnold's poem is Greek,—Greek in the irregular choric metres, in the scene, and in the ideas. Instead of Miltonic strictness of conscience we rejoice in the calm and happy gods. Here, too, are the bards, who with labor and pain attain the vision of the Olympians. The eternal difference between the two poems lies in the spirit animating each, a difference especially evident in their conclusions. For Milton's concern is to teach a lesson: Heaven will stoop to feeble virtue. Arnold does not think of pointing his poem with a moral. Without apothegms on virtue *The Strayed Reveller* leaves us deep in the joy of the senses:—

"Ah, cool night-wind, tremulous stars!  
 Ah, glimmering water,  
 Fitful earth-murmur. . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Faster, faster,  
 O Circe, Goddess,  
 . . . . .  
 The bright procession  
 Of eddying forms sweeps through my soul."

These four poems, with the second and third taken together, are thus illustrations of three significant poetic characteristics of Matthew Arnold. They constitute an admirable introduction to the study of his poetry. His perfection of form Arnold

himself was accustomed to refer to frankly as "superiority of style and manner". His love of the idea, for its own sake, is the expression of his dictum that poetry is "a criticism of life". And the Hellenism found in his poetry is an important part of the concept that he held so dear in the realms of thought: "spontaneity of consciousness".

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# WOODCRAFT

"For there 's a little wood I know  
Where all the trees of wonder grow."  
—RONALD LEWIS CARTON.

In the woods are the faint fair flowers of the Spring—  
Green fledgelings, all a-flutter and a-wing—  
Their petals touched with tender pencilling.

In the woods awake the wayward winds of May,  
That set the trees a-talking in their play;  
And die in sleep before the close of day.

In the woods is the still pool that gleams apart,  
A mirror for the haunted forest-heart,  
And little rainbow lives that skim and dart.

In the woods are the faint footfalls, and the glance  
Of fleet wild faces, sudden and askance,  
Down the long vistas, where the shadows dance.

In the woods is the dark dell, embayed with thorn,  
Into whose heaven no single star is born,  
Nor, for its lone delight, one ray of morn.

. . . . .  
Heart of the woods, perennial and alone,—  
Through your green boughs all the dead winds have blown,—  
The secrets they have told remain your own.

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